

The Family Tree Center

The Family Tree Center, The Billings Exchange Clubs' Child Abuse Prevention Center, was established in 1985. The Center is committed to the prevention of child abuse and neglect in all its forms in Yellowstone County and the surrounding area. A variety of programs are available to support and strengthen children and families in the community and Center staff also provide training and technical support to agencies across the state that are implementing family support and violence prevention programming.

Presently, the Center operates with 5 full-time and 7 part-time employees. The annual budget of approximately \$250,000 is funded primarily through small grants, a fee for service agreement with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human service, United Way of Yellowstone County, fee for service technical support contracts, and through the Festival of Trees. Over 600 families will be impacted by direct services provided by staff and volunteers during the fiscal year. An additional 15,000 children will have access to the Second Step Violence Prevention curriculum as a result of training and assistance provided by Family Tree Center staff members.

The Center utilizes "best practices" programming to support and educate children and families. Each program addresses very specific needs common not only to parents at risk for abuse and neglect but among all parents in our community. A description of each program and the rationale for its inclusion in the Center's Family Resource Center model follows.

Community Caring/Home Visiting – In child abuse prevention efforts, home visiting services have played a key role in providing families with long-term goal oriented support. Research has demonstrated that families at risk for abuse and neglect benefit from such services in a variety of ways:

- Decreased child maltreatment according to maternal self-report
- Short-term reductions in rates of maltreatment according to CPS reports
- Short-term and long-term decreases in maltreatment for higher risk families
- Improvement in maternal attitudes toward using harsh discipline
- Decreased overall potential for maltreatment
- Reduced hospital visits for child injuries
- Improved maternal life course (longer time between and fewer subsequent pregnancies, i.e.)

Home visiting programs have found the strongest results in parent-child interactions, along with decreased parental stress, increased knowledge of alternatives to corporal punishment, higher levels of understanding of child development and less overall distress. Additionally, children involved in home visiting programs are less likely than at-risk peers who did not receive these services to engage in antisocial (involvement in the criminal justice system at a young age, for example) and unhealthy (smoking, drug and alcohol use, early initiation of sexual behavior, i.e.) behaviors.

The Family Tree Center provides both volunteer-based and staff-based home visiting programs for families of children age 0-12; while volunteers are assigned to work with

families with no or few identified risk factors, staff members work with families at significant risk for abuse and neglect. Most services are provided within the home of referred families; however, families often “drop-in” at the Center to access support services, to problem solve, or to participate in other Center services. Home visitors require small, shared offices/cubicles to complete paperwork and meet with clients. One private meeting room would also help insure client confidentiality.

Referrals to the home visiting programs are made largely through the School District, Maternal Child Health Programs (Public Health), the hospitals, and a variety of other community agencies and clinics that provide services to children and families. Funding home visiting services is provided by the Montana Children’s Trust Fund and United Way of Yellowstone County.

Parent Education Services – The Center utilizes the Nurturing Program, a curriculum designed to address both cognitive and affective aspects of parenting. The Nurturing Program offers developmentally sequenced classes, provides more intensive training than traditional video- or lecture-based parent education classes, requires, at minimum, a nine-week commitment, and includes a family interaction component. Pre- and post-evaluation materials are also utilized to determine program effectiveness and to direct instruction. The Center provides the Nurturing Program for parents of infants, parents of toddlers/preschoolers, and parents of grade school age children.

Center staff have received training to train others to deliver this curriculum, and several volunteers as well as other professionals in the community have accessed that training through the Center. Working with schools and social service agencies on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations, this curriculum has also been made available in Pryor and Lame Deer.

While ideally being offered as a part of a family resource center, parent education services can be delivered at alternate locations that include access to a child care center and /or additional space for children’s group.

Referrals to parent education services come through the referral sources listed above as well as through DPHHS-Child and Family Services, the judiciary, and probation and parole. Funding for parent education services is provided through the Montana Children’s Trust Fund, a fee for service agreement with the Department of Public Health and Human Services, and United Way of Yellowstone County.

Respite Child Care – The Family Tree Center offers respite care as part of its family support services. Research indicates that stress is a significant factor in most cases of severe physical abuse, and the respite program is designed to provide child care options for parents who otherwise face continuous and heavy child care responsibilities and isolation from the larger community. Respite services are available on a scheduled basis, and families may access this service for 3-6 hours/week. May parents use this time to attend adult education or college classes, access mental health services, meet with Center staff to discuss parenting concerns, or to engage in activities to reduce stress or isolation.

Parents are also encouraged to spend one hour per month in the respite center where they can learn nurturing skills through the modeling provided by staff members. Children attending the Center program are provided two meals during each three hour shift, an educational or craft activity and an opportunity for free play in a developmentally appropriate environment. The Child Care Center is also used provide care for children whose parents are attending parent education classes or accessing support services at the Center. The Center is licensed for 12 children.

Funding for the respite child care program is provided by the Montana Children's Trust Fund, small grants, and through a small contract with School District #2's Adult Education Program.

Prevention Education Programs – The Center provides training and material support for the Second Step Violence Prevention Program and for several Personal Safety Programs that provide children with information about how to recognize and resist unsafe situations. Additionally, through our prevention education programming, Center staff present training on "Recognizing and Reporting child Abuse and Neglect," "Developing Effective Family Support Programming," and a variety of other topics related to child abuse and neglect. Center staff also provide consulting services to School District #2's Family Resource Centers and present information on school-based family support programming statewide.

Funding for Prevention Education programming is provided through United Way of Yellowstone County as well as through fee for service technical assistance contracts.

Montana Women's Prison Parenting Program - The Center has contracted with MWP to provide not only parent education programs, but also, Babyread, a program designed for women who enter prison while pregnant. A grandmother support group, one on one visits between mothers and their children, ICP (Intensive Challenge Program), and Growing Up Again, a class that looks at how individuals were parented, how to re-parent yourself, and how to be a healthier parent for your children. Monthly Kids' Day Visitation is another way mothers and their children can interact in a nurturing and safe environment. The Center provides 1 full-time and 1 part-time staff to MWP to facilitate these programs.

Resource Library – The Center houses a small resource library that includes materials on a wide variety of parenting, child abuse, and child development topics. Some materials are available for check-out while others are available for use on-site.

Information and Referral Services – The Center receives approximately three calls each day from individuals seeking information and /or referral to other community resources.

On-Call Service – The Center provides all clients, and anyone who class the center after hours, a phone number to access the on-call staff member. Parents may use the on-call service when they are in crisis or when they need a supportive ear during non-business hours.

Client Profile –

80% of families accessing FTC services live at or below the poverty level, and 80% self report one or more at risk factors for child abuse and neglect. 20% of all clients are American Indian. While all Center services are voluntary, nearly 50% of all parent education participants are mandated to attend a parent education class. 50% of respite care clients are pursuing educational opportunities while their children are in care, and 85% of clients who initially access the respite care, also access other center services (home visiting or parent education, generally). 60% of families are headed by a single parent; of these, approximately 15% are headed by single fathers. Approximately 30% of clients in all programs have a history of drug or alcohol abuse or mental health diagnosis or both. Nearly 20% of families involved in the home visiting program have one or more children with significant medical, developmental, or behavioral issues.